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SOME OF MR. GALSWORTHY'S HEROINES

BY LACY LOCKERT

THE novels of Mr. Galsworthy customarily find favor with reviewers. In the chorus of praise that greets each new book from his pen, dissent would be unheard. Beyond question he has restraint, a sense of form, command of language, capacity to analyze and depict familiar human types. Yet the frequent serial publication of his stories in a magazine whose other "star" contributors were Robert W. Chambers and Ella Wheeler Wilcox is suggestive that his vaunted art has something of the meretricious in it, and that his moral philosophy is an immoral philosophy. For clearer discrimination, let us go back two or three years to some novel over which "the tumult and the shouting" has died—let us take, say, his *Saint's Progress*, which was lauded like the rest, and examine it in detail.

Saint's Progress deals with the misfit existence, the experiences, and the spiritual trials of a vicar, Edward Pierson, in war-time England. It aims to portray him, I think, as a lonely survivor of the Age of Faith, in painful clash with the modern spirit and point of view, especially typified in his daughters. The elder of these, Gratian, shares the unbelief of her husband, a young doctor; eighteen-year-old Noel falls in love with twenty-two-year-old Lieutenant Cyril Moreland, whom she has known just three weeks. He is going to the Front, and she wants to marry him. Pierson not unnaturally tells her she cannot; so on her last night with Cyril, Noel takes matters into her own hands, without benefit of clergy.

She says afterwards that she did this "to make sure of him." Again, more fully: "I did it so that we should belong to each other. Nothing could have taken him from me." There have no doubt been girls who have erred from precisely that wrong-headed notion that thus they could form a *quasi* marriage tie. Anybody who knew anything about the human male

would know that, so far from binding a man, *that* would be a good way to lose him; the whole idea becomes absurd when one considers how a man might thus be "bound" to a dozen or so at once. But in the present instance we cannot accept Noel's statement-after-the-fact. It is natural to sentimentalize and justify one's misdeed with ambiguous words. Mr. Galsworthy has earlier told us explicitly and from Noel's own lips the impulses that urged her.

"We can't afford to wait. He might never come back, you see, and then I should have missed him."

"Missed him"! She could not miss his love; she had it—knew she had it. That love was mutually confessed; and the sweetness of its avowal and its realization, the being together while they shared that realization—these things were theirs already, and no act or ceremony could make them more real, and no stroke of fate could wipe them out. There was only one thing which immediate marriage could guarantee her against missing; which, therefore, it is plain she was mightily concerned not to miss; and which she was going at all costs to make sure of, by marriage or without marriage. In other words, her declaration, being interpreted, will be found to parallel closely that of Mall Barnes, in the old Elizabethan comedy, *Two Angry Women of Abington*:

"O Lord," said I,

"Shall it be so? Must I unmarried dye?"

And being angry, father, farther said,

"Now, by Saint Anne, I will not dye a maide!"

"No coarser minded girl in Elizabethan comedy"—"no dramatic portrayal of the animal more observantly conceived or more faithfully executed": thus Mr. Gailey characterizes Mall. Yet there is no essential difference between her position and Noel's. What difference there is, is in her favor. Noel's longing is focused and particularized—and importunate:

I want to make sure of Cyril, auntie; I want everything I can have with him while there's a chance. I don't think it's much to ask, when perhaps I'll never have any more of him again. . . . Oh, auntie, I want him *so badly!*

As Hashimura Togo said after seeing the American Drama of Sex, I would rather drink my beer in some saloon where thoughts are more pure.

Merely to write about an immoral person is not immoral. Yet it is next to impossible for the author to be just a camera and nothing more; we can nearly always tell that he has likes and dislikes, approvals and disapprovals. Mr. Galsworthy's attitude is apparent, and frequently he declares it in so many words. I quote again. The italics are mine. Noel speaks:

"Daddy oughtn't to mind. Old people haven't to fight and get killed; they oughtn't to mind us taking what we can. *They've had their good time.*"

It was such a just little speech that Thirza answered,

"Yes; perhaps he hasn't quite realized that."

As was the love of Noel Pierson for Cyril Moreland, so was the love of Cyril Moreland for Noel Pierson.

"Of course I mean to come back, but chaps do get knocked over, and I think it's cruel that we can't take what we can while we can. [It is interesting that he and Noel seem to have agreed on the same euphemisms.] . . . We don't mind risking our lives and all that, but we do think we ought to have the run of them while we're alive."

Well—as aforesaid, Noel didn't get her way about the marriage after all, so proceeded to take what she could while she could. And she did it "in the first degree," too—that is, with ruthless, deliberate intent, not in the swirl of a brain-beclouding, unexpected passion. On the bank beside the water, these lovers sat through the gathering twilight and the deepening shadows.

Longing paralyzed their brains. . . . They could do nothing but press close to each other, their hands enlaced, their lips meeting now and then. On Noel's face was a strange, fixed stillness, as if she were waiting—expecting. [You see, she had it all planned out, nicely and poetically.] . . . And just then the top of the moon looked over the wall . . . the color of pale honey.

"Ours!" Noel whispered, and her hands drew his head down to her.

It is from no pruriency of mind that I regret the intervention at this point of the inevitable line of dots. I should like to know whether the natural reverence a man feels for a woman, if he really loves her, made Cyril slow to understand; whether he felt any qualms or shock of disillusionment, or repulsion. But it seems to be an established convention in English literature, dating back at least to *Michael and his Lost Angel*, that opportunity assures commission.

"He was hers forever now, in spite of anything. . . ."
Yes—in a certain sense.

Then Cyril went to France, and presently was killed, I am happy to say; and in due course of time Noel found she was going to become a mother. She might have known that she would; a story-book girl always does, even from a first and single fault (unless she is going to have a regular "career"—then she *never* does). Probability matters nothing to our consequential-minded purveyors of fiction. They certainly must believe that the wages of sin is life.

The rest of the book deals mainly with the situation thus created; though there is a good deal of "war-atmosphere" worked in, with due share of humanitarian sentimentality about the wrong of hating the Germans and punishing "conscientious objectors". Of course the blow falls heaviest on the poor "saint" father. The author had set out to make him appear pathetically futile and absurd. He did it. But if Edward Pierson is meant to stand for the Elder Generation, he is as much a libel upon it as Noel is upon the Younger. There was backbone to the old religionists, a stalwartness of faith based on hard-headed conviction and categoric reasoning. Perhaps that type is beyond Mr. Galsworthy's comprehension. Pierson's religion was a vague spiritual æsthesis, which he cherished with the rapture of a dilettante. When Noel wanted to marry Cyril, he did object that war-marriages were frequently just a momentary gratification of passion, and that people who had known each other only three weeks might later find themselves an ill-matched pair; the main thing he balked at, however, was the profanation of the exquisite, sacred mystery of wedlock by such irreverent haste. He lacked the mental grasp to perceive that the institution of marriage exists to assure the offspring a father's care and guidance; and that therefore a union contracted when there was immediate prospect of the death of the bridegroom would be a legal evasion—in effect, an invalidating—of the institution. But sanity along these lines is scarce enough everywhere in war-time.

As was to be expected, Pierson agonized over the sin and was very gentle with the sinner. When he saw the young mother fondle her child, he felt caught up to a beatific vision of the

Divine; similarly, when disturbed about Gratian's soul, he had comforted himself with the thought that, as she loved her husband, she could not have left God's side—because of the Scriptural assurance that "God is love," I suppose; the tortuous windings of some paths of modernism are a little beyond me. At length it became clear that his congregation would not accept the closet-skeleton in their midst, and he resigned to take a chaplain's berth in the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, where he found himself as far out of touch with his fellows, as unanchored and ineffectual, as ever.

As Pierson is Mr. Galsworthy's target, so Gratian's husband is his comfort. George Laird acts as an admirable mouthpiece for the author's speculations, if not his convictions.

"Life is a huge, wide, adaptable thing. . . . *Life's* going to be the important thing in the future, Nollie; not comfort and cloistered virtue and security, but *living*, and pressure to the square inch. . . . Regrets and repinings and repressions are going out of fashion; we shall have no time or use for them in the future."

Let us get that proposition straight. All checks of conscience, all considerations of morality, are to be scrapped; we shall have no time or use for them in the future. Henceforth everyone will live as hard and as fast as one can, obeying every impulse and excusing one's self on the ground that life is adaptable.

"It was all a question," this scientist maintained, "of whether Nollie could make good her vagary. If she could, and grew in strength of character thereby, it was, *ipso facto*, all right; her vagary would be proved an advantage and the world enriched."

To the higher type of scientist—the man of broad, clear, imaginative vision, not the puttering experimenter incapable of a synthesis—it would have been fairly obvious that our social forms are themselves the pragmatic selection of a thousand centuries, and are rigid because their strict maintenance is believed to work better, by and large, than any trimming to the convenience or growth of individuals. Such is the way with the majority of "advanced" thinkers; they are so advanced that they have left all the lessons of history behind them.

But it was reserved for the motherly Aunt Thirza to utter the supreme and shining example of perverted moral concept, of downright nonsense, that adorns the pages of *Saint's Progress*.

“‘You know, Nollie, I absolutely refuse to regard this as any sort of tragedy. To bring life into the world in these days, no matter how, ought to make any one happy.’”

According to the same brilliant line of reasoning, the German soldiers who went through Belgium ought to be presented with Carnegie Hero Medals. True, the circumstances there were rather uncondusive to the desired precious result; but that was the fault of the Belgian women in not being more acquiescent.

Under the lash of public opinion Noel's proud self-justification gave place to shame that she had been unladylike; which was as near as she ever got to a real moral instinct. Time assuaged the pain for Cyril, and she was left unreconciled and craving. In a purely general way, now, she longed for what she called “life.” When she stretched herself on the ground, “she wanted the earth to close its arms about her; she wanted the answer to her embrace of it. She was alive and wanted love.”

The first place she got a chance at it was in the person of an incapacitated soldier, Fort. But he himself was entangled in a liaison with a fast-fading siren who was another one of those people that are insatiably anxious to “live.” “‘Live? Why—don't you always?’” he once asked her, in the sanest words of the entire novel. This episode, even when well ended, Pierson could not overlook. “‘In my view,’ he said, ‘you are as bound to Leila as if you were married to her.’” Paradoxically, such a conferment of dignity upon a mere physical relation is to be expected from those who take the most supernal view of marriage. They are totally blind to the fact that, if they lead people to expect any consideration whatever, to claim any right to faithfulness, in a union outside wedlock, they will tempt many to forego the binding ceremony; in short, that thus they encourage free love and make marriage seem unnecessary.

Oppose Noel's having anything, and she would immediately want it; she married Fort as soon as her father was conveniently out of the way. In so far as it sees her safely “put” where she is not likely to make further mischief, the story ends at this point. In so far as it concerns the “progress” of Pierson, it does not end at all. Perhaps it carries a moral: If parents exercise any check upon the impulses of their children, they are responsible

for disastrous consequences, which may be expected to ensue; and the children are probably in the right anyway, for impulses are sacred and inhibitions hateful.

Now, what is really important about *Saint's Progress* is the fact that it is not an isolated aberration. If it were, it would not deserve such extended treatment. It is thoroughly typical of Mr. Galsworthy. Go back a few years, and take something he did then—*The Dark Flower*, for instance. In that book, when Anna Stormer falls in love with her husband's pupil, she finally struggles through to renunciation (or, at least, acceptance of defeat), but all her qualms and decisions relate purely to individuals; she never once considers her duty in the social scheme. And when Mrs. Olive Cramier, the author's darling, finds that she cares for Mark Lennan, does she avoid him, build a wall between them? By no means. If Mr. Galsworthy wants to know how a really noble, conscientious woman would feel and act in such a situation, he ought to read *Saracinesca*.

In *The Dark Flower* we find the same special pleading for individual exceptions to moral codes, the same view of physical union as the "fulfillment" of love instead of merely the legitimate by-product of a partnership to which love often leads, the same insistence upon feeling rather than ethical judgment as the one sure anchor of a man. Even Lennan's final decision of loyalty was inspired by kindness, not a jot by sense of right. There is the same cosmic eroticism ("constantly involving the vegetable world," as Mrs. Gerould puts it), and the same absurd identification of eroticism with "life." "Just the fleeting moments of passion," we are told, are the only things in existence, "with all its prizes and its possibilities," that satisfy completely.

The total incomprehension of decent standards that characterizes *Saint's Progress* and *The Dark Flower* is observable in a wretchedly large share of modern fiction and the criticism which extols it. Something may be traced to a natural, wholesome reaction from Victorianism. No rebel, however, can wield the lightning unless he is himself a god; we feel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* to be indeed of one piece with the work of our contemporaries, but Hardy was the Shakespeare of that school

which has only a Beaumont in Mr. Galsworthy and a mere Fletcher in Mr. Robert W. Chambers. The recrudescence of Romanticism, especially through its persistent confusion of the sensuous with the spiritual, bears also a share of the blame. But whatever its cause, the vicious philosophy which runs through our literature is a present fact, insidious in its effect upon the vast army of readers who are stuffing themselves with that and nothing else; and there is need of clear, sober thinking and writing, of a revision of our outlook and a getting back to fundamentals, if we are not to drift into a limbo of eroticism where all sanity and rectitude will founder.

In the first place, we need a sharp realization that the mere desire to do a thing does not make it right. Our novelists seem to think that if they only show how natural and credible it is that a man should feel or do thus-and-so, *that* excuses him. As if we did not know already that everything—every theft, every murder—is the effect of a moving cause! It is man's capacity to resist temptation, to follow conscience, at the least quite as much as it is his superior intellect, that dignifies him above the brute. To abdicate the moral throne will not tend to keep him above the brute.

In the second place, we need a concentration of emphasis on the fact that marriage is *fundamentally a social institution*. As formative of the Family, as source and maintenance of the next generation, it possesses a high seriousness sufficient to account for the saying of a revered authority, that husband and wife are joined in one flesh by God himself, or to justify any sacramental aspect with which it has been invested. Such was the historical view; there could have been no other when the parties were customarily chosen for each other by their respective fathers. The theory of "mated souls"—altogether recent—is inevitably productive of moral dissolution. Its corollary is that loveless wedlock is degrading. Now once grant that the marriage ceremony alone is not sufficient to make respectable the union of man and woman, but that love is necessary to dignify it, and the next easy step is the assumption that love is itself sufficient to dignify it—without the ceremony at all.

With marriage recognized as a social contract, much that has

been rough will be made smooth. People will not feel, when they find their harmony anything but divine, that God evidently never joined them; that therefore it is wrong to remain mated at all. They will understand that they have pledged themselves to a proposition which common weal demands they go through with as best they can. There will be less talk by eager lovers, either in literature or in life, that the woman (or man) they love is wrongly bound to an unloved mate.

Another thing we need is a finer distinction in our vocabulary; the word "love" covers entirely too many and distinct concepts. It is used indifferently to designate either affection or passion, or a combination of the two in any ratio. We observe it applied to the tenderness which one has for another arising from delight in their similarity of tastes and ideals, from admiration for character, and from a community of experiences; and also applied to physical desire. The truth is that while both are frequently found together, it is by no means always so. Yet by that slovenliness of mind which makes us think with words instead of with the realities they inaccurately denote, we constantly impute to the latter feeling, a purely carnal, purely selfish emotion, something of the spiritual values that we all sense in the former.

In the "Autumn" episode of *The Dark Flower* Mr. Galsworthy recognizes and makes it perfectly plain that Lennan has little save affection for his wife and nothing but passion for Nell—no smallest mental bond. He is veracious in showing that neither feeling in the least impairs the force of the other. (Lennan, with man's inherent polygamousness, might have desired Nell even if he had been married to a woman he loved in every way, like his lost Olive—Mr. Galsworthy is perhaps too sentimental to create *that* situation.)

But in his extreme wrong-headedness it is the affair with Nell that Lennan poetizes—and this in the name of Love! He anticipates bringing her "to full knowledge of love within his arms." "How desolate, sacrilegious, wasteful to throw love away; to turn from the most precious of all gifts; to drop and break that vase." Naturally he values it; for he presently concludes that "a man has but one use for woman." The impression is that Mr. Galsworthy agrees with him.

Only one use for women! Mr. Galsworthy and Mark Lennan to the contrary notwithstanding, there is "another use" for them: in association between congenial minds, in harmonious comradeship, to which by reason of their gentler nature and quicker sympathies—traits feminine rather than female—they bring unique, precious factors impossible in any comradeship of man and man. Whatever of permanence, of beauty, of nobility, of spirituality any of those various things we have been calling "love" may hold, lies in the emotion which springs from this "other use"; but both the use and the emotion are doubtless beyond the ken of those who see existence only in terms of sex-adventure, woman as a mere bundle of sex, and man as an excited male.

As for the "love" which Mr. Galsworthy celebrates, a demonic thing which is said to seize and enslave (but can be shaken off by vigorous exercise!), there is another name for it—a word of identical length and with the same first letter—that is more precise.

To say so, is not to say, "Out upon it! Fie upon it!" With all our modern clamor for frankness, very few people face the physical calmly and frankly. Either they draw away from it as from something unclean and degrading (the old way), or they become entirely preoccupied with it (the new way), or they persuade themselves that it is not physical, but spiritual, and invest it with religious values (the usual way). It needs to be recognized as an *instinctive appetite*, quite as unmoral in itself as any other appetite—moral or immoral according to the circumstances of its gratification. The desires of the palate are respectable and legitimate for their own sake, when they are not indulged to gluttony or regaled upon stolen fruit. But we would deem it absurd to wax rapturous or pathetic or mystical about them—though their *raison d'être*, the sustainment of life, is quite as important as its reproduction. Apples are very good to eat, but they are not accounted transcendent save in the earlier chapters of *Genesis*.

Even of love in the highest sense, the only true sense, equally as of love falsely so-called, we need some metes and bounds. Love bulks too large in modern literature. The fact hurts literature—consider that in the field of drama, for instance, no

tragedy better than *Romeo and Juliet* has a wooing for its theme. (Nor, outside of French Classicism, does any considerable proportion of great dramas deal with the domestic triangle, or with the "quadwangle.") The literary dominance of love hurts life, too; it destroys balance and control by its incessant suggestion of exalted values—suggestion to which we yield ourselves often where balance and control are most wanted. When, in love's name, ruthlessness towards the rights and feelings of others and towards obligation before mankind is excused or even glorified, we imbibe the doctrine and behave accordingly—perhaps are thrilled with pride that our easy disregard proves our emotion genuine. Such ruthlessness, where it furthers our desires, would be only too easy, without encouragement.

It does not make for improvement when Mr. Galsworthy writes about the love of Lennan and Olive being bound to endure somewhere among the woods and flowers or down in the dark water, though they themselves presently be dead; or when he suggests that perhaps even melodies of music love and mate. Like a snowball our concern with romance and our apotheosis of it have been growing for several centuries, until they can culminate in such nonsense as this. The average "moving-picture" enforces the lesson *ad nauseam*. The average person's mind cannot get out of that groove. Writers cannot speak of love except dithyrambically; everything about it, virtue or vice, is idealized. "The love before which the world was but a spark in a draught of wind"—thus Lennan's for Olive. Stripped of its verbiage, the fact appears: "a love whose obsession destroyed all sense of relative values."

It may readily be granted that the business of love and mating is an important thing in one's life; but it is not the *only* important thing; and the more one becomes and achieves, the less it looms beside other things. Its limit of possible magnitude is definite; whereas the fruits of one's endeavor are limited only by the bounds of one's capacity.

As for Olive, the cause of Lennan's emotional insanity, here is Mr. Galsworthy's caressing chronicle of her thoughts:

. . . this day for which all her life had been shaping her—the day of love. . . . To grow and reach the hour of summer; all must do that!

That was the meaning of Life! She had no remorse. . . . As well might grass stay its ripening. . . . Whatever Power had made her heart, had placed within it this love. Whatever it was, whoever it was, could not be angry with her!

And she was about to run away from her husband, with another man! It would be difficult to find a second passage packed with as many varieties of characteristic Galsworthy poison. Here human passion is vaguely associated with "the vegetable world," love invested with mysterious and awful significance, eroticism identified with Life, desire justified by itself. If you feel any impulse, it is all right; for the God who made you, made it in you. A comfortable philosophy, truly! Suppose the thing in Olive's heart had been Hate instead—the desire to mutilate somebody with an axe! But her love would wound no less than her hate; aside from her disagreeable husband, to whom she had plighted herself as a free agent and responsible person, it would wound her uncle by her disgrace, wound Lennan's sister and his old guardian by the scandal, wound society by breach of its essential institutions.

Sometimes a man is unwittingly his own critic. In *Saint's Progress*, Mr. Galsworthy satirizes the typical modern novel,—

with its self-conscious exhortations to complete self-consciousness, its doctrine of pure and utter selfishness or of a hopelessly self-conscious unselfishness, with the querulous and thin-blooded passionateness of its young heroes and heroines, bent on nothing but realizing their unrealizable selves through a sort of brain-spun arrogance and sexuality.

O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels

—as we see others!

LACY LOCKERT.